UNITARIANISM & JUDAISM

IN

THEIR RELATIONS TO EACH OTHER

An Address to the Students

OF

MANCHESTER COLLEGE

OXFORD

AT THE OPENING OF THE SESSION, 1896-97

BY

C. G. MONTEFIORE

'The College adheres to its original principle of freely imparting Theological knowledge without insisting on the adoption of particular Theological doctrines.'

Oxford

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According to Mr. Leslie Stephen, the author of the life of Miss Martineau in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, the Central Unitarian Association some sixty-seven years ago offered prizes for three essays intended to "convert" respectively the Roman Catholics, the Mohammedans, and the Jews. In the year 1896 an unconverted Jew has received the honourable invitation to address a body of Unitarian students of theology at their central training college in Oxford. The two contrasted facts illustrate a great change not merely in the mutual relation of Jew and Unitarian, but (since big movements have small issues as well as large ones) in the general relation of varying creeds and religions to each other. This change would, I think, be regarded by most of those here present as one of progress and enlightenment.

In the days when Miss Martineau wrote the three prize essays, which, as Mr. Stephen concisely puts it, probably converted nobody, but brought her in forty-five guineas, people were wont to hold that one religion was wholly true, and any other religion was wholly false—at any rate, so far as it differed from their own. If Mohammed was an impostor and the Koran worthless, so much the better for Christianity. And Jews were at pains to prove that whatever was new in the Gospels was not true, and that

whatever was true was not new. Both Jews and Christians were not sorry to pick what holes they could in the religious teaching of the founder of a rival faith. To-day the tendency is different. It is rather the imperfections of Mohammedanism than its excellences that would give pain to a liberal Christian of our own generation, and the elements in Mohammed's character and life which point more clearly to imposture than to inspiration are those which give us the greater difficulty in our theistic explanations of the world and of its history. We would fain that there were as much goodness and truth as possible in all those creeds which have influenced, and influence still, the lives and actions of so many millions of our fellow-men. Seeing darkly and in part as we do, it is the good which tends to testify to us of God, by whatever name it calls itself, in whatever guise or pattern it may be found.

Yet, though we are glad to mark and to discover elements of truth and goodness in alien creeds, we are none the less attached to our own. We are not less fervent believers in the reality of truth because we are more conscious of its infinite complexity. The love of our own religion is consonant with an appreciation of others. And a love which realizes imperfection in the beloved object may be more fruitful than a blind affection which, because it sees no weakness or blemish, can strive for no improvement and attempt no purification.

It is in this spirit and temper that I would propose to-day to make a few rather disconnected and random observations on Unitarianism and Judaism in their relations to each other.

The friendly meeting of the Jew and the Unitarian may be taken to imply a sort of reconciliation between the present and the past. Judaism in some respects seems to be the very embodiment of conservatism in matters of religion, while your own faith seems to mark the *ne plus ultra* of liberal Christianity. But both may allow that the living roots of the present lie hidden in the past, while the

ultimate value of the past for the present lies in its influence over the future. We look backward in order to see more clearly what lies around us, to meet and mould more intelligently what lies ahead. Oxford seems an appropriate place in which to suggest thoughts like these.

It is profitable for an individual to have points of contact with many different persons, and perhaps it is no less profitable for one religious community to have several points of connexion with others. Unitarianism seems to be in that respect very favourably situated. And if it be true that the old Greek virtue of *σωφροσύνη*, that untranslatable mixture of sanity, balance, self-control, and moderation, be still a desirable excellence in thought and practice, in social and political opinion as well as in religious belief, surely it is the virtue which you, students of Manchester College, should straightly aim at, and which your position and training should enable you to attain. Of all teachers and theologians, you might and should have a wide and calm and sympathetic outlook upon the world and its affairs. You of all men might most justifiably set yourselves as an ideal the character of Plato's philosopher—of him "who is ever longing after the whole of things, both divine and human," whose mind is truly comprehensive, "synoptic," to use Plato's own significant word. Of all theological students, you should best be able to free yourselves from Baconian "idols"; and this emancipation in one field should serve you in good stead when you come to the practical work of life, guarding you and setting you free from idols of party and politics, free even from the idol of freedom.

Yours, I should imagine, is the only theological training college at which the inaugural address of the session might, with a certain degree of fitness, be entrusted one year to an orthodox Christian, the other—I am afraid I cannot make the antithesis perfect—to an unorthodox Jew. You have relations and points of connexion with Judaism on the one side, and with orthodox Christianity on the other. You are in a position of vantage to absorb the permanent

elements of truth and value lying at your right hand and at your left.

For, looked at from one point of view, though you might yourselves deny it, you constitute a phase of Judaism; looked at from another, though many Christians deny it, you are a phase of Christianity. The paradox of the one assertion to some of yourselves is no greater than the paradox of the other to many beyond your pale.

Clearly your relation to all forms of Christianity other than your own is of much nearer and greater importance than your relation to Judaism. But that which is of less importance need not therefore be of none. And if Judaism should ever move resolutely forward out of the ruts of mediaevalism, it may still constitute an allied spiritual force of value and interest to yourselves. In America this forward movement has already begun.

That the Bible of the Jews ends with Malachi and not with Revelation may seem to form a gulf between them and you, over which no bridge can well be thrown. And this gulf may yawn wide in their eyes as well as yours. Again, the fact, if it be one, that the Jews as a body persistently ignore or misinterpret the mission and message of the greatest teacher of their race, may seem to put them out of court in the religious discussions of Europe and her colonies. The religious development of Judaism may seem to have been violently arrested 1900 years ago, so that it counts only as an interesting survival, but not as a living religious force, of danger as an enemy, of service as an ally. As to these views, a few words later on; but meanwhile, be the truth of them what it may, it is only fair that in your estimate of Judaism you should remember, as a starting-point for the formation of judgment, how it stood out and suffered for a doctrine to your belief in which your very name is a witness and a pledge. For that doctrine you, as well as we, have suffered in the past, and for that doctrine the greater number of the Jewish race is still suffering sore persecution from the hands of Holy and Orthodox Russia

even to this very day. That doctrine may be interpreted well or interpreted ill; it may even become a fetish of meagre value and little meaning. But taken at its best and fullest, with all its implications and corollaries, it surely constitutes a true bond of union between the Unitarian and the Jew.

Even as students—and many of you will, I trust, not cease to be students when you leave Oxford—it might be well to take some account and form some estimate of Judaism in your appraisement of the world's religions. Perhaps the best way to set about that is to go back to the beginnings, and to make a resolute effort at an historic and impartial appreciation of the era and the contemporaries of Christ. The work and the spirit of your distinguished Principal and Vice-Principal will be to you a guide and an example. It will, I think, then become clear to your minds that, whatever other less valid or less adequate reasons there may have been, it was mainly because of the fundamental difference which separates you from orthodox Christianity that the Jews were soon separated for ever from the offshoot of their own faith. If this difference be a justification adequate for your own separateness, may we not reasonably believe that it was something more than prejudice or hardness of heart which maintained a separate Judaism even after all the labours of St. Paul? It is not possible to judge Judaism fairly until this simple proposition—that the Jews of the first century who remained Jews were neither knaves nor fools—has been either established or refuted.

Indeed upon your acceptance or denial of this proposition will depend your estimate, not only of the Judaism of the past, but equally of the Judaism of the present. If the Jews, either intellectually or morally, were unjustified in giving Christianity the go-by 1800 years ago, they are clearly unjustified to-day. If, on the other hand, they were justified then, it does not follow that they are justified in maintaining their religious separateness now; but the question, at any rate, is not prejudged and fore-

determined. It may even be that the good fruit of the old refusal is still only ripening for a harvest of the future. And one quite latter-day effect of the refusal, bearing issues of some little pith and moment for our common religious cause, may be a nearer and more sympathetic alliance between the Unitarian and the Jew. I am bound straightway to confess that the attainment of such an alliance would in this country be prevented by us rather than by you. It is more likely that a Jew may receive an invitation to preach in a Unitarian chapel than that a Unitarian would be asked to preach in a Jewish synagogue, and also, supposing either invitation given, it would be easier for the Unitarian to accept it than for the Jew.

Speaking as a reformed, liberal, or unorthodox Jew, whichever adjective one may choose to adopt, I speak doubtless with prepossessions that other people might call prejudice. But in order to explain my meaning, I must at once make an important limitation, and avow my conviction that it is only a liberal or reformed Judaism with which modern Unitarianism can have any closer alliance or affinity; just as, in my own belief, it is, in spite of any temporary obscuration, to reformed Judaism that the future of that religion belongs. For it is only reformed or liberal Judaism which, in my opinion (is it less dogmatic to insert the qualification or less egotistic to omit it?), can exercise any influence upon the religious thought or practice of the civilized world.

The truth is that the negative attitude of Unitarianism towards the dogma of the Incarnation has led in modern times to many developments. A Unitarianism which championed miracles while denying the divinity of Christ, or a Unitarianism which should not maintain the freest possible standpoint towards the "Higher Criticism" *both* of the Old *and* of the New Testament, does not seem to your present leading divines consistent with itself. Hence it is that though modern Unitarianism may agree with orthodox Judaism in the denial of a central dogma of

orthodox Christianity, the two creeds are widely separated off from each other by the fact that the one, having nothing to fear from ethnology or criticism, can freely accept their results both in the pulpit and the class-room, while the other still clings to forms and dogmas, the foundations of which have been undermined. The two religions are therefore out of harmony with each other. It is only in a Judaism that is at one with "criticism"—using that word in its widest and fullest sense to include comparative religion as well as biblical interpretation—that modern Unitarianism can feel much interest. Orthodox Judaism appeals to you, I take it, only so far as its capacity for martyrdom in the present and the past may show its capacity for development in the future.

When I used the word "alliance," I was primarily thinking of ourselves rather than of the world without, of an alliance for our own internal profit rather than for external issues. For looking in the first place to my own community only, I believe that we Jews have much to learn from you. We have to learn that the doctrine of the Unity has, if I might say so, somewhat different opposites and somewhat different implications to those of fifteen centuries ago. The Unity of God means more than that there is one God only. It means more than that there is, and has ever been, but a single divine self-consciousness. Take one of these additional meanings as an example. If the One God either is, or can be, subject to localized conditions of space, then to the modern mind he is still, in the highest sense of the word, not truly One. Therefore it is that with the modern Unitarian's conception of the *Unity* of God, the *literal* truth of the story of the revelation at Sinai would be no less inconsistent than the literal truth of the story of the Transfiguration or of the Virgin Birth. Many Jews have still to realize not only *that* this is so, but *why* it is so. They are still rather too apt to interpret or to emphasize the great doctrine of the Unity in a numerical rather than in a metaphysical sense, and perhaps their

conception of God has not yet shaken itself wholly free from the inadequacies of "Deism." But this limitation, when it exists, may have important issues. For our adult conception of God reacts not only upon our conception of the narratives of the Bible, but also upon our private and personal religious life. It is not, therefore, a mere question of philosophy. As we conceive God, so too may our relation to him in our soul's life be coloured or determined. And as the child's conception of a human Father sitting on a far and lofty throne, but with eyes and ears of wondrous keenness and interest to see and to know all things both small and great in heaven and on the earth—as *this* conception becomes dim and fades away, so is it urgently necessary that it should be replaced, ere it is yet too late, by another conception, more adequate and rational, but also admitting and sustaining a relation between man and God that shall be intimate, fervent, emotional.

Then, secondly, Jews might join hands with Unitarians in a common determination, to the advantage of us both, to find out the truth, so far as it can still be found, about Jesus and the New Testament. Jesus is not necessarily the greatest and most original religious teacher whom the world has ever seen, merely *because* millions of persons have said and thought so. The large majority of the millions are clearly of small account. Even as regards the myriad saints and thinkers who have exalted Jesus to this position of primacy, there would have to be considerable deductions made for custom, affection, and environment, and a hundred influences beside. At the same time, this immense concurrence of qualified opinion demands from any one who ventures to oppose it the most careful and patient consideration. There may be better reason to suppose that the judgment of the enormous majority of the civilized world is wrong as regards the greatness of Jesus in religion than as regards the greatness of Shakespeare in poetry; but there is surely a good deal to be said for the argument, that even as a low opinion of

Shakespeare shows a feeble poetic faculty in the critic of poetry, so a low opinion of Jesus must show a feeble religious faculty in the critic of religion.

Nevertheless, it must be confessed, on the other side, that most students of theology have begun the critical study of the New Testament with the conviction instilled into them from their childhood, that the teaching of Jesus was immaculate, and his life the noblest ever lived. As they bring this conviction with them to the facts, it is not surprising that these facts should appear to confirm it. It is a conviction which must strongly influence their interpretation, not only of the New Testament itself, but of all other Jewish literature. Now it seems to me that the liberal Jewish student and the liberal Unitarian student of to-day are in an excellent position of vantage from which to begin the effectual study of the origins of Christianity and the right appraisement of its Founder. Out of all sects and creeds, it is they who, with best chance of success, might make a strong effort to free their minds from all prepossession and prejudice, and to seek, in a right spirit of humility and independence, for the attainment of truth. Why I think that you and we (if I may for a moment join myself with my own sect) are best fitted for this great work is not, of course, because either of us are a bit cleverer or wiser than our fellows (if we think that, we shall probably arrive at crazy paradox instead of sober truth), but because the result, whatever it be, makes presumably less difference to us than to the students of either orthodox Judaism or orthodox Christianity. If an orthodox Jew should come to the conclusion that any part of the religious teaching of Jesus or of Paul was both new and true, that conclusion must, I should imagine, give a direct negative to a cardinal dogma of his faith. And, similarly, if an orthodox Christian should perceive any gaps, flaws, or inconsistencies in that teaching, or if the authenticity of any part of it seemed doubtful, such a perception

would operate injuriously upon his secure attachment to Christianity. But so far as I can see, it makes but very little difference to liberal Judaism what the exact measure of greatness and originality which Truth assigns to these two illustrious men may actually be. It is a question of profound interest, but liberal Judaism would remain at bottom the same, whatever the decision. And you Unitarians would not need to modify the fundamentals of your present faith, whether these hypothetic gaps, flaws, and inconsistencies exist or no, but, whatever the issue, you could, if I may so express myself, afford to abide by it. Neither Unitarian nor liberal Jew is so eager for the facts to point to one particular direction that, even after any amount of study, it is almost impossible for them to point to any other. As I said just now, neither is bound to bar by anticipation any other result than one. Therefore, as the land lies at present, no students better tempered and attuned for the elucidation of the great problem could easily be found.

It were, indeed, much to be wished, both for the sake of knowledge and of religion, that there were more communion in study between Jew and Unitarian. It is one of my favourite day-dreams that the Jews should also erect and endow a theological training college at Oxford, fitted by the width and excellence of its teaching as well as by its outward appearance to rank with Manchester and Mansfield. I grieve to think that your men of wealth and power see the fundamental necessity of such a college, with adequate staff, endowment, and curriculum, more clearly and cogently than our own. Jewish students might attend, with infinite advantage to themselves, many of the lectures now given at Manchester; and at the same time it is possible that certain courses at a Jewish college, dealing with the inner side of what the Germans call *Neutestamentliche Zeitgeschichte*, might be profitable for yourselves. In this way a few chosen scholars from either wing of the common Unitarian camp might be so trained

as thereafter to accomplish new and valuable work on that most important and most mysterious of all periods of human history—the hundred years that precede, and the hundred years that follow, the crucifixion of Christ.

Then, in the third place, other reasons exist for a closer alliance between Unitarian and Jew than the desired attainment of fuller truth about the heroes of the New Testament. There are great forces and movements, both to the right and to the left, alike only in this, that they are antagonistic to ourselves. The reformed Jew and Unitarian are sometimes mocked for what critics are pleased to call the exiguous quantity of our faith. We have little to stand on, men say; our equilibrium is unstable. We are full of objections to any excess of faith: we are no less sensitive to any diminution from the little we still declare as valid. The poet's words are quoted against us:

> Oh, the little more, and how much it is!
> And the little less, and how far away!

To us, whose central dogma is faith in a living God, it can never seem as if our faith were small, even though this dogma were the only one in all our creed. It is not in its smallness, but in its greatness, that its difficulty lies. Arithmetical expressions which seek to translate faith into pounds and ounces are not merely inaccurate, but misleading. They may even mislead ourselves. But if we choose to employ such a popular figure for a moment—while recognizing its impropriety—we may admit that reformed Jews and Unitarians alike occupy a middle position, and are no less opposed to a dogmatic *too little* than to a dogmatic *too much*. The existence, then, of those antagonistic forces and movements, which we may roughly and readily denominate *too little* and *too much*, should tend to make us draw nearer together for the better sustainment of a common hope and cause. If each find something to learn from the other, there need be no loss of identity in the process. An alliance of this kind does not mean coalescence.

Speaking as guest to his hosts, it is perhaps more fitting that I should touch but lightly on those specific excellences of my own faith, the existence of which might make an alliance between us and you of no merely one-sided advantage. Yet liberal Judaism may fairly aver that it does possess certain distinctive merits and advantages of its own. It is, to begin with, not so much a breaking away or a protest as a development and a growth. Judaism, as my friend Mr. Simon has recently pointed out, is more concerned with assertion than with denial. To the outsider Unitarianism seems to some extent to bear the defect of being in its essence rather negative than positive; it seems to need the existence of orthodox or Trinitarian Christianity as its foil. It lives by its very protest against that which it repudiates as false. The existence of the false appears necessary for its keen and effective acceptance of the true. Judaism, on the other hand, persistently affirms; it is no dissenting branch of any other religion, but, so far as its own positive teaching goes, independent of the existence of every other faith. It did not gain and it need not preserve its distinctiveness so much by emphasizing what it dissents from as by maintaining what it affirms. In its reformed or liberal phase it does not stand or fall by the criticism that may be passed on the date of any one book or on the teaching of any one man. It can largely modify its outward embodiment without losing its essential connexion with the parent stem. Whatever may happen to it in the more distant future, it may justly put forward its plea to take its place as a religion which is no longer out of court in the modern world because it has not absorbed the universalism of St. Paul. It is not too closely connected with the prevailing religion of civilization to become entangled or mixed up in it. It is the left wing of a body which is itself Unitarian, and therefore clearly and fully marked off from every faith which in that respect is other than its own. It can be, and it will be, slowly and naturally recruited from the less advanced

members of the parent stock, who can pass without social or other difficulty into its ranks. It may, perchance, be not too much to say that it will either gradually so shape itself as to be capable of receiving adherents from without, or that it will contribute important elements to that larger and more comprehensive faith in which both Unitarianism and liberal Judaism shall ultimately be harmonized and resolved.

But we liberal Jews recognize with friendly admiration that you too have special excellences which deserve and demand your fealty and devotion. Your very relation to the dominant creed is an immense advantage so long as you are determined to remain true to your own particular denomination. For there is much in a name: it separates and distinguishes on the one hand, it binds and holds together on the other. Though your religion has an Asiatic origin, it is completely Europeanized. Unlike Judaism, it is involved in no practical difficulties with the everyday life and organization of modern society. And above all, you have a real title to that freedom the name of which is inscribed above your doors. The history of religion, the critical investigation of sources and documents, the comparison of creed with creed, and of dogma with dogma—to all these great studies of modern times you offer a welcome sincere and untroubled, because you face their results with confidence and serenity. You have no hidden fear that your cause or your creed can suffer from the conquests of Truth. You have no secret skeleton in the cupboard. You need not say to criticism "thus far and no farther," for your faith is not pervious to its knife. Your inward and outward religion, its teaching and its embodiment, are consistent and in harmony with each other. Such a religion as this should surely evoke and maintain the enthusiasm, the love, and the loyalty of its students and disciples.

You who are training for its ministry can enter on and continue in your work with unchecked and unchequered

feelings of hope and devotion. Remember especially that it is a work intimately associated with religion. Upon Unitarian and reformed Jew alike there lies this common obligation, to prove that the supposed meagreness of their religious belief is in truth adequate for the highest religious life. We must not be so carried away by any other aspect of our creed or our environment as to lead us on to ignore or lay less stress on the religious life itself, apart from its connexions and combinations with other things more perceptible to our touch or visible to our eyes. There may even be a time to remember that democracy, or University settlements, or poetry, or biblical criticism, or freedom from superstition, or unconventionality, are none of them in themselves religion. We too must have our saints as well as the orthodox, and let us remember — perhaps the modern reformed Jew needs to remember this more than yourselves—that no saint was ever satisfied to make Reason a perfect synonym for God. Our liberal forms of faith are on their trial: let us attempt to prove their power. Without an infallible Church, without an infallible Book, without an infallible Law, let us ardently proclaim in word, and humbly seek to show forth in deed, that men may still live and work, realizing God's presence, and loving him with all their heart, with all their soul, and with all their might.